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Booker T. Washington Five Years After

BY

KELLY MILLER

HOWARD UNIVERSITY

WASHINGTON, D. C.

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BOOKER T. WASHINGTON FIVE YEARS AFTER

"The evil that men do lives after them; the good is often interred with their bones." These words were placed in the mouth of Marc Antony, with Shakepearian adroitness, to appease the passion of the hostile multitude. This propitiatory utterance contradicts the universal propensity and experience of mankind. Contemporaneous faults and foibles of genius are never permitted to obscure their permanent contribution to the sum total of human good. Lifetime reputation is an unsafe measure of the influence of a great man. His acts must be judged in the calm retrospect, and disengaged from the predelictions and prejudices of the period, in order to determine his proper place.

Booker T. Washington has been dead five years. Even now too short an interval has elapsed to disentangle his real work and worth from partisan zeal and animosities, and to weigh calmly his genuine contribution to the welfare of his race and nation.

For almost a generation the name of Booker T. Washington occupied a large share of the attention of his fellowmen. The nation delighted to mark the wisdom of his sayings and to write his speeches in their books. He occupied as large a place for as long a time in public esteem and favor as any man of his generation. He bore the stamp of natural greatness. His wisdom was intuitive. According to African lore, he

was born with a caul over his face. He knew without learning, and understood with the certainty of instinct. Like Abraham Lincoln, he possessed an infallible inner sense whose guidance he followed with satisfied assurance. He possessed the genius of common sense, and the philosophy of simple things. His was a universal mind. While he dealt with the most complex and distressing social particulars, his spirit always rose above the temporary intricacies of besetting conditions and lived in an atmosphere that was calm and serene. Booker T. Washington was, perhaps, the only man of eminence of his day who was free from race prejudice. He neither despised nor esteemed any man because of his race. Race prejudice is often extolled as a virtue, but the moral genius of mankind reprobates it as a vice. Though corporally aligned with the Negro race, morally and spiritually he was heir of all the ages. Flesh and blood did not reveal to him the truth by which he guided his path. Progress from enmity to amity is the highest mark of human culture. "Love your enemies; do good to them that hate you," is the goal of human strivings which the carnally minded still deem impossible of realization.

His spiritual inheritance was reinforced by the folk sense and the folk feeling of the Negro race. The Negro embodies the assemblage of Christian virtues and graces to a degree unequaled by any other member of the human family. Meekness, humility and forgiveness of spirit is an undetachable coefficient of his blood. He is incapable of deep seated hatred and revenge. He endures with passivity and quick forgetfulness outrage and contumely which would make other races curse God and die. When he is reviled,

he reviles not again. The Negro nature strangely fulfills the apostolic definition, "Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in truth; beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things." To the revengeful and vindictive spirit, this racial virtue is an amazing grace; but to the Negro it is assuredly a saving one. By no other endowment could he possibly survive in the midst of an arrogant and rapacious civilization with which he has neither the power to cope nor the spirit to contest. The Indian showed resentment; and is dead. The Negro submits and survives. There are thirty million Negroes in the western world who are clearly destined to inherit the full measure of European civilization and culture. History affords no more striking fulfillment of the beatitude with a promise, "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth." The vehement and inflammatory utterances on part of a certain type of temperament is but the temporary effervescence of an excitable mood, and does not express deep-seated or serious purpose of the people whose cause is thus espoused. The Negro spirituels breathe in blind, half-conscious poetry the spontaneous feelings of his soul without bitterness or hate. Booker T. Washington fathomed the feelings of his race as well as his own personal disposition when he said, "No man can be mean enough to make me hate him." This apothem ranks with the great moral maxims of mankind, and takes its place alongside of the wisest sayings of saints and

sages of all time. Let other races conquer through the exploitation of power, the Negro will triumph through the manifestation of love. Mr. Washington also embodied the mother-wit and never-failing good humor of his race. Next to his submissive spirit, the Negro's humor is his greatest salvator. He laughs where others weep; he smiles where others frown; he grins where others groan. He thus relieves the pressure upon his overburdened spirit which would otherwise pine away under the weight of inpressing ills. His humor disarms his enemies. The race that laughs is the race that lasts.

Booker Washington possessed the qualities of naturalness, moderation and simplicity, which are not usually considered to be attributes of the Negro race. He had poise without pose. Extravagance in word or deed was foreign to his nature. Amidst turmoil and confusion he maintained a calm and unruffled exterior, albeit there may have been inner groanings of soul too deep for utterance. A quick appreciation and proper appraisement of values are characteristic of men of long experience in handling practical affairs. What others acquired by experience, he gained through instinct. Walt Whitman speaks of himself as "meeter of gentleman and savage on equal terms." Booker T. Washington could mingle with kings and potentates with the dignity and nonchalance of one to the manor born, and could sup with a peasant in a log cabin in Alabama and make himself an agreeable guest in this humble environment. He received a gift of a million dollars from admiring philanthropists and endured the bitter abuse of his own race with equal equanimity and composure. Excitability of temperament is con-

sidered characteristic of the Negro race, and yet he was steadied by a natural ballast that held him in stable equilibrium. A simple unadorned story of his life in "Up from Slavery," recorded without the least ornamentation or studied style, takes rank with the great biographies of celebrated men. It was easy to believe the genuineness and sincerity of his purpose because of the naturalness and simplicity of his nature.

With this secret and method, Booker T. Washington entered on the scene of action more than a quarter of a century ago. A superlative nature needs no nurture. A soul surcharged with moral and spiritual potencies requires only the suggestion and the occasion to wake it into life and power. Samuel Chapman Armstrong gave the suggestion and the Negro situation in the South furnished the field. Ingersoll says of Shakespeare: "Give him an acorn, and he will create the forest; give him a grain of sand and a drop of water, and he will create the seashore and the mighty ocean." The man met the opportunity.

Assigned to a little Alabama town with an Indian name, in no sense different from a hundred similar communities with like designations, in a few years he gave Tuskegee a name as renowned as our great metropolitan centers. This institution grew out of the personality of Booker T. Washington as surely as the oak grows out of the acorn. It is but the outward embodiment of his inner spirit.

His whole propaganda was based upon the philosophy of peace and good will between the races. The apostle Paul advises that we should, if possible, live at peace with all men. Booker Washington always found it possible. His task was a most difficult and

delicate one. He preserved the equilibrium of a triangle of forces. Up to his time the white man of the South, the white man of the North and the Negro were of divergent minds as to a proper plan of racial adjustment. There was something of co-operation between the North and the Negro, but the southern white man was left out of account. He essayed, and in large measure succeeded, in bringing these three factors into harmonious co-operation. An ardent disciple of General Armstrong in promoting the gospel of industrial education, he gave that doctrine an emphasis and application which it was impossible for the founder of Hampton to do. The unpreparedness of the Negro to compete in the skilled pursuits of life with requisite expertness gave him the strategic advantage in promoting this practical gospel. This was not a one-sided obsession on his part. He saw the present pressing need, and urged its fulfillment with all of the ardor and earnestness of his nature. He was a partisan advocate only in the sense that he stressed with unreserved emphasis the things he felt to be of the greatest need for the time and place with which he was dealing. If advocates of other types of effort were worsted in the controversy, it was because they were unable to match his earnest urgency and persuasive plea. His advocacy of industrial education was not limited to the Negro race, but was as wide as the circle of human needs. It meant most to the Negro only because he needed it most. He aimed to reach the man farthest down.

No man of his day did more, if as much, to put practical education in the program of our educational systems throughout the country. He became the ex-

ponent and spokesman of this practical ideal, not only for the Negro, but for the nation. The utilitarian tendency in education owes as much to Booker T. Washington as to any other contributant agent or agency. They called him the wizard of Tuskegee, not because of his working in the darkness after the manner of the traditional wizard, but because of the wonderful works which grew, as it were, out of the wizardry of his august personality.

The apostle of the new method came upon the scene at a critical time in the history of race adjustment. The reconstruction program which attempted to enforce political equality had been overthrown. The carpetbagger, scalawag, and Negro politician had been driven from power, but were still cherishing the lingering hope to regain the blissful seat. The sectional hatred engendered by the war was gradually yielding to the mollifying influence of time. The attitude of the North was hesitant and equivocal; that of the South was growing assertive and hopeful. Political discussion hinged upon the wisdom or unwisdom of enforcing the war amendments to the Constitution. Force bills were introduced in Congress to compel the South to yield to the declared and decreed will of the nation, but were defeated by skilfully manipulated combinations. Economic discussions began to vie with political rights in the arenas of public debate. The question of the industrial and economic rehabilitation of the South was supplanting agitation for political reconstruction. The wounds of war were slowly healing. The North and South were gradually gravitating towards a basis of common understanding. The nation was growing tired of the continual agitation

of the race question, which for fully a generation had all but absorbed public attention. Up to this time every Negro leader had ardently espoused the old political platform. The industrial and economic development of the race had been given little earnest consideration. The gospel of race development according to Armstrong, was deemed decidedly unorthodox. The northern philanthropists and friends of the Negro had espoused the same view. Institutions for the so-called higher education of the Negro, fostered by philanthropy, flourished like a bay tree.

The public mind, by the well known laws of social psychology, will not hold one sentiment intently for a long time. It is always in quest of some new thing. The time was ripe. The public sentiment was ready for a change. A brilliant colored man with attractive public powers was all that was needed to launch the new propaganda. The time was ripe to exploit any Negro leader who would abandon the old method and advocate a new policy more in consonance with changing public sentiment. Booker T. Washington stepped into the breach. He understood the point of view of the southern white man, as well as that of the northern white man and the Negro himself, and endeavored to hold a just balance among conflicting states of feeling and belief. As ambassador for the Negro he was accepted at the court of the white race, and spoke before the bar of public opinion for his people boldly, as an ambassador ought to speak. He did not demand more than he had the power to enforce or the ability to persuade. He who demands only what he can command is wise; he who demands less is cowardly; he who demands more is a braggart.

Booker T. Washington was a pragmatist of the first water. He believed in attempting the thing possible and postponing the unattainable to the time of increased ability and power. He knew with an instinctive certainty just how far the prejudice of the white race would permit the Negro to go, and just how far the Negro with his traditional weakness and ineptitude could go without such permission. The bar was placed at the exact height which the athlete could leap with his present training and strength, and was to be raised to higher levels according to developing prowess and skill. There was sharp criticism on part of his race because he did not place the bar at an ideal height, whether the acrobat could jump it or not.

Dr. Washington was often denounced by critics of his own race because, as spokesman, he did not demand all that they were entitled to in theory. But no one has ever demonstrated that he ever asked for less than it was probable, or even possible, to secure. He was the philosopher of the possible, and believed in reaching the ideal by gradual approximation. His was the patience of knowledge. The one who comprehends the whole equation refuses to become unduly excited over any unfavorable factor. He knew the Negro and he knew the white man as none before or since has known, for his knowledge rested upon the infallible foundation of intuition.

Booker T. Washington had a deep and abiding faith in the ultimate possibilities of the Negro, although he fully appreciated his present defects and imperfections. In his belief the white race had already contributed about all it was calculated to do through direct and intimate ministration. Race reclamation must

come through self-directed activities. Up to this time white men had worked for the Negro. Dr. Washington taught that the Negro must henceforth work for himself. Tuskegee was built on the basis of this idea. Negroes conduct all of the activities of this institution in its various features and ramifications. It was declared that the Negro could not safely be put in charge of large interests, such as the construction of large buildings and the management and manipulation of large plants. He did not argue the point, but produced the concrete results. This institution, which sprang up as if by magic, under Negro enterprise and skill, still remains the largest and most complicated project under race direction and intimate management. Not only so, but Tuskegee became the center of race energy and enterprise, ramifying in all directions throughout the country. White philanthropists were easily persuaded of the wisdom of this policy and were willing to furnish the means to give the experiment a full and fair trial. There is perhaps no other philanthropic enterprize that promises so much for the ultimate development and reclamation of the race. The only help that is worth while is the help which helps the helpless to help themselves.

Dr. Washington minimized politics and stressed economics as the immediate step in race development. And yet he believed that the Negro should have all the political rights he could get, just as he believed that he should have all of the higher education he could use. The storm center raged around his political policy. The whites, North and South, were easily persuaded of the importance of economic development as contrasted with political power. He became not only

the spokesman, but the oracle of race adjustment and relationship. So complete was the confidence imposed in him by the white race that he was chosen as the referee of such political patronage as it was deemed wise to assign to the Negro leaders. In this capacity his position was anomalous. The avowed advocate of political relinquishment becomes the controlling dispenser of political power. But where the carrion is, there will the vultures be also. It did seem amazing with what ease the erstwhile Negro politicians were won over to the Washington practical and pacific program after Roosevelt selected him as the political referee for the race. So great is the persuasive power of patronage. In this seemingly anomalous capacity, Dr. Washington, after all, was not inconsistent. He believed to the fullest extent in the rights of the Negro, in so far as he was able to secure and maintain those rights. And he did not deem it inharmonious with his asserted policy of political quiescence to help him as far as feasible on the road to political power and prestige. The putative apostle of the Negro's political elimination wielded more political power than has befallen the good fortune of any other Negro before or since his time. The assumption of this role, strangely enough, did not offend the white men of the South, whose avowed purpose was to exclude the Negro from politics, and who relied upon the program of Dr. Washington to facilitate this exclusion. There was the reserved feeling that whatever he did was wise.

There always existed a small group of assertive Negroes which Dr. Washington never was able to bring to this point of view. This group was composed mainly

of college-bred men of liberal culture who were unwilling to compromise their intellectual integrity by surrendering the abstract claim of political rights. They could not tolerate the suggestion of inferiority which his program implied. Even his control of political patronage was not able to convert the most stubborn of these. In abstract disquisition, the man with the theory always has the advantage of the man with the thing. Since Dr. Washington's death this group has gained the ascendency in dominating the thought and opinion of the race, but has not been able to realize to the least degree the rights and recognition so vehemently demanded.

A statesman is one who possesses the sagacity to formulate a program of procedure and who has the force to impress it upon his day and time as an effective policy. Booker T. Washington is the only Negro who has been able to force upon the acceptance of the American people a policy and program for his race. From this point of view he may be denominated the one commanding race statesman yet appeared. It is true that his policy has not solved the race problem, but it has laid down certain lines which must be followed in any plan of future solution. His program is not complete, but it is fundamental as far as it goes.

Booker Washington died before America entered into the world war. He left no successor. Those who came after him absorb and apply such measure of his method as may be appropriate to their nature and understanding. Others will take advantage of his demise to disparage such of his doctrines as do not meet their approval. None have caught a full portion of his secret and method. The white race regard his

loss as irreparable, and hardly expect to look upon his like again.

The last five years have wrought great change in the spirit of aggrieved groups in all parts of the world. A new sense of self-assertion has been aroused in the Negro. The white race has become more determined and intolerant. The Ku Klux Klan is a concrete expression of this intolerance. The two races are facing each other with suspicion and distrust. There is no Booker Washington to lay propitiating hands upon them both. Had Booker Washington survived to this time, his wisdom to deal with the shifting exigencies of the problem is conjectural. Who can tell what effect the perplexing issues of reconstruction might have had upon the reputation and fame of Abraham Lincoln had he survived to that time? We only know in case of the one as of the other, that his pacificatory spirit and his enlightened common sense would have been a sobering and steadying influence in any emergency.

The titanic struggle has greatly modified many of the conditions with which he had to deal. He urged the Negro to remain in the country; the war thrust him into the city. The war created unforeseen industrial demands. Five hundred thousand Negroes rushed to the North to fill the vacuum in the labor market. The advocate of political inaction is apt to be hooted by the multitude whose passion has been heated by strife. There is little patience with the counsellor of patience when the beat of the war drum dins in the ear. The radical rides on the rising tide of war. That "the Negro could earn a dollar in the South, but could not spend it; and spend a dollar in the North, but could

not earn it," ranks among Dr. Washington's most apt and pithy sayings. But the truth and appositeness of this sententious assertion were suddenly reversed with changing industrial conditions. The new situation of the Negro frustrates much of the philosophy that used to pass as the last word of wisdom. Programs are always subject to the exigencies of shifting conditions; principles will abide.

Booker T. Washington's pacificatory doctrine of racial peace and good will, his sound sober appraisement of the importance of practical education, his urgent insistence upon economic development instead of too confident reliance on political action, his common sense gospel of industry, thrift and economy, his philosophy of accomplishing the possible rather than attempting the unattainable, must be at the basis of any future scheme of race reclamation and relationship.

His place in history is secure. His contribution is permanent. His influence will abide. Booker Washington will be remembered by posterity, not only as a great Negro, and a great American, but as a great man.

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